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The Emerging Anthropology of « the Political » in Postcolonial South Asia*

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Jonathan Spencer

Introduction

1 In 1984 the Tamil movie-star and politician, M.G. Ramachandram, was paralysed by a stroke. For three years he lived on in a Brooklyn hospital room, his followers celebrating the miracle of the « thrice-born» leader's survival. Finally in 1987 the end came. M.S.S. Pandian uses what followed to introduce his short monograph on MGR:

> Perhaps the best way to begin the incomparable success story of Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandram (popularly known as MGR) and hid politics, is to begin with his funeral... No less than two million people, including several who had travelled long distances from remote villages, formed MGR's rather long funeral procession. In other places, people who could not attend the actual funeral organized mock « funerals » in which images of MGR were taken out in procession and buried with full ritual. Countless young men tonsured their heads, a Hindu ritual usually performed when someone of the family dies. Thirty-one of his desolate followers, unable to contain their grief, committed suicide. (Pandian, 1992: 17).

2 Two million mourners, thirty-one suicides: MGR's life has been mapped out in such apparently surreal statistics: in 1967, when a fellow actor shot him, 50,000 fans gathered at the hospital where he was treated. When he suffered his stroke in 1984, « At least twenty-two people immolated themselves, or cut off their limbs, fingers or toes as offerings to various deities, praying for the ailing leader's life ». During this last illness, 27,000 new roadside shrines were constructed in Tamil Nadu (Pandian, 1992: 18).

3 The roads in the North-Eastern state of Bihar have also been witness to some interesting political phenomena, notably the arrest of the BJP leader A.K. Advani on his theatrical

progression towards the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1990. The Chief Minister for Bihar at the time was Laloo Prasad Yadav. Since 1997, Prasad has been jailed at least five times in the judicial fall-out from his larger-than-life administration of the state. In November 2001 he was ordered to surrender to the court in Ranchi. Here, from the Indian magazine *Frontline*, is an account of Laloo's trip to court:

> Laloo Prasad arrived in Ranchi with fanfare, travelling on a motorized chariot which he called Sadbhavna rath. The journey was more than anything a political show. The RJD supremo's entourage consisted of hundreds of horses, camels, elephants and a music band. Supporters presented him with a sword as he travelled in his air-conditioned rath, which was escorted by a kilometres-long cavalcade. Party workers chanted slogans such as: « (Don't worry Laloo Yadav, the entire people are behind you) ». Laloo Prasad stopped en route at Biharsgarif to offer chaddar (a length of holy cloth) at the tomb of the Sufi saint Makhdom Baba. The cavalcade virtually laid siege to the highway leading to Ranchi[1].

4 Horses, camels, elephants: I guess we're not in Kansas any more. Laloo's career has been built upon his position as a member of a numerically powerful group, the Yadavs, who have been active within the politicization of the so-called Backward Classes since the 1970s. When the LSE anthropologist Lucia Michelutti carried out fieldwork with Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh a few years ago, she was told that they were a « martial race », and « by caste "natural" politicians » (Michelutti, 2001: 1).

> Informants explain their predisposition to succeed in the political game as « innate ». They said that « they learn it in the womb/belly » (*pet se sikhte hai*) and that they were born to be politicians. Informants use the same « belly » metaphor when they answer my queries about apprenticeship especially in relation to activities related to the cow-herding profession[2] (Michelutti, 2001: 2).

5 Yadavs are good, they say, at « doing politics ».

6 Not everyone, though, is quite so happy with this version of the *dharma* of the politician. In West Bengal, another LSE anthropologist, Arild Ruud encountered a rather different valuation of the political. In the opening months of his fieldwork, people persistently berated him on the topic of « politics »:

> One term that was often used is « dirty » (*nungra*). Politics was referred to as being dirty, meaning unprincipled, as something unsavoury that morally upright people would not touch, a sullied game of bargaining and dishonesty. Another term that was frequently employed to describe this foul game was « disturbance » (*gandagol*). Politics, it was held, represented a continuous social disturbance that caused unease, brought disharmony to society, and ruined its elaborate design and calm stability. The reason for this, I was told, was that politics thrived on instances of trouble, or « rows » (*jhamela*). These could be outright fist-fights (*maramari*), or abusive exchanges (*galagali*), drawn-out quarrels (*jhagra*), or just general animosity and hostility (*hingsa*). (Ruud, 2001: 116).

7 In the paper from which this is taken, Ruud goes on to explore the local construction of politics as dirty work, within the framework of what he calls the « Indianization » of political institutions. Although he spends some time trying to work out why so many people turned up for an apparently pointless and rather dull village political meeting, Ruud doesn't comment on the very frequency with which people told him about the unsavouriness of local politics, the apparent enthusiasm with which they reported on the moral failings of political leaders. Reading between the lines, my sense is that these Bengali villagers, like people across the subcontinent, were at once appalled and fascinated by the workings of the political. What grips them at one level is the sheer melodrama of it all, the ostentatiously performed agonism of the exchanges between

political opponents, as well as the symbolic excess of South Asia's magical realist politicians – elephants and camels on the road to jail.

Sri Lanka and the limits of our theoretical vocabulary

8 All the examples so far have illuminated one or other facet of what we might understand as « the political » in contemporary South Asia. The political encompasses the village meeting, the nasty local gossip about the backstage deals of local leaders, but also the spectacular excesses of a Laloo or an MGR. In Sri Lanka in the early 1980s I encountered all of this. In purely entertainment terms, political rallies were the biggest shows in town, with speeches and singers and the helicopter touching down with the biggest of the big cheeses to attend. In the village where I conducted my fieldwork, people spoke of politics (*desapalanaya*) in terms very like Ruud's Bengali informants: as a dirty business, a source of trouble and moral disturbance. But the political, so construed, also stood as the ground against which other, more positive, images crystallized: the political rally was the quintessential setting for the enunciation of nationalist rhetoric, for speeches about the Sinhala people and their destiny as Guardian of the island of Lanka and protector of the heritage of the Buddha. As well as the pop singers and polticoes, there would always be a body of Buddhist monks on the platform at local rallies, lending the occasion a minimal sense of gravitas. The agonistic world of politics contained, within it, expressions of its own negation: the transcendence of division and interest signified, in their different ways, in the symbolism of the nation and the presence of the body (*sangha*) of Buddhist monks.

9 There was something electric about local politics in the early 1980s, a sense of excitement and unpredictability. Partly this was a result of the way in which national politics had become braided into the very fabric of local sociality: neighbours pursued neighbour-type disputes about chickens and buffaloes in the idiom of party political divisions. The politically connected prospered, the politically disconnected were persecuted. Eager lads attached themselves to minor local leaders, basking in their own ephemeral importance in the leader's retinue, and ever ready to throw their weight around when so required. Everyone discussed the doings of national politicians in first-name terms.

10 But electricity contains its dangers too. Violence was a real threat in local politics and, after I left, the capillaries of neighbourhood political divisions became the channels through which denunciations and counter-denunciations flowed as the island was swept by a wave of political terror. A radical group called the JVP targetted local agents of the ruling party; the powers-that-be in their retaliations sometimes identified whole categories, young men from particular castes or villages, and sometimes just picked on old enemies with much more particular scores to settle. The violence shocked and horrified my own closest informants when I spoke to them a few years later: this was not like our country, they told me, everything was turned upside down. And, as one told me, « We don't do politics any more ».

11 What to do? (as they say in Sri Lanka). It was the early 1980s, and there I was, an Anglo-Saxon empiricist committed to writing about what was there, and not what I would have liked to be there. Nothing had prepared me for my hosts' obsession with the political, and intellectually little came along during the 1980s in my lonely hunt for an appropriate intellectual toolkit.

12 The most obvious place to start looking for theoretical sustenance was in that thing called « political anthropology ». Somehow, though, that didn't seem equal to the task. The most obviously « political » thread of the next decade, the anthropology of power and resistance, also struck me as unhelpful. Two more useful developments came in the shape of the emerging anthropologies of nationalism and violence, so like those around me, my Sri Lanka was most theoretically thought through in terms of violence and the nation. It's taken a lot longer to begin to come to terms with the political, and it may be helpful to reflect briefly on what it was about the political that proved so uncongenial to the more obvious possible theoretical tools. As we assess what was wrong with the intellectual material to hand, so the nature of the problem, and the outlines of possible resolutions, may begin to swim into better focus.

13 Problems of time and space rule out any kind of nuanced account, but let me start with the most obvious suspect: political anthropology. What was so wrong with what was called political anthropology in the late 1970s? A casual answer might simply be that it was boring, a subdiscipline that had run out of steam at some point in the early 1970s. Behind that rather jaundiced assessment lies one partial truth: that what made political anthropology less and less interesting was its propensity to strip away whatever was distinctive and interesting about any particular bit of politics in the first place, and *that* in turn was a consequence of the very way in which it had been defined: « A comparative study of political systems has to be on an abstract plane where social processes are stripped of their cultural idiom and are reduced to functional terms », as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 3) famously put it. No camels and elephants for them. The price of reducing something, as we all know, is reductionism, and that particular spectre has haunted political anthropology ever after.

14 Quite apart from its hostility to particular « cultural idioms », political anthropology also evaded the moral dimension of the political.

> I assume that individuals faced with a choice of action will commonly use such choice so as to gain power, that is to say they will seek recognition as social persons who have power; or, to use a different language, they will seek to gain access to office or the esteem of their fellows which may lead them to office. (Leach, 1954: 10).

15 Edmund Leach's heuristic has a long provenance in Western social thought. One lineage leads back to Machiavelli's espousal of a cold-eyed realism in assessing human affairs: « I shall set aside fantasies about rulers, then, and consider what happens in fact » (Machiavelli, 1988: 54). The other derives from that moment in the eighteenth century, magisterially analysed by Albert Hirschman (1977), when social thinkers started to separate the passions from the interests, allowing their successors to posit a rational, calculating individual as the ontological basis, the axis of certainty, for the emerging human sciences. Which, needless to say, doesn't stop Leach's formula sounding quite a bit like the view from Bengal or Sri Lanka, where politics is indeed often seen as the zone of untrammelled individual interest. But there is a difference in tone: Leach, unlike Ruud's peasants, sees nothing corrupting or « dirty », there is no « disturbance », in his view of human action. Rather, « a conscious or unconscious wish to gain power is a very general motive in human affairs » (Leach, 1954: 10). Leach's urbane generalization somehow strips this kind of action of its power to disturb us. To seek power in some sense or other is an unremarkable course of action, true enough; but to seek power and nothing else, nakedly, in public, strikes many people as strange and rather disturbing. The effect of Leach's heuristic, and the tradition of thought he is speaking from, is to *naturalize* such

conduct, to deprive it of its sense of moral danger and make it, instead, something banal and commonplace. Hirschman's marvellous essay is partly concerned to remind us of the tortuous path that eventually allowed social philosophers to claim a direct causal link between the pursuit of the personal interest and the moral improvement of the collectivity. The point is simple: such a link is far from self-evident, and the Bengali village reaction is a recurrent feature of people's encounter with the agonistic space of the political.

16 As political anthropology became routinized in the 1950s and 1960s it did so in the long and gloomy shadow cast by its big sister, political science. Looking back at the literature of that time, two aspects stand out. One, obviously enough, is the confident deployment of the cool language of dispassionate science: « Ways of viewing the differences between political and other kinds of social relationships are neither right nor wrong but merely more or less useful for scientific purposes », as the political scientist David Easton (1959: 219) put it in a once-influential survey of political anthropology. Classic political anthropology was greatly concerned with definitions of its subject matter, formal models, and typologies. These may have had their use in marking out a certain territory for the new subdiscipline, but they also had one other effect: to pin down, and thus somehow *contain* the political. If the empirical problem we are trying to analyse is in part the very uncontainability of the political, its tendency to overflow its banks and wash through all areas of social life, this stance is, to put it no stronger, unhelpful.

17 Whatever the reasons, political anthropology was in something of a rut by the mid 1970s and is only now beginning to re-emerge from that rut, albeit in the fastidiously rephrased guise of the new « anthropology of politics ». The dominant exploration of political themes in anthropology in the intervening years came in the form of the anthropology of power and resistance. In the late 1980s I took my tales of village politics and village nationalism on tour through some of the better-known and more theoretically advanced sites of North American anthropology. The results were not an overwhelming success. « Where are the bodies? » I was asked; « Where is the resistance? » My answers failed to impress.

18 Although the work carried out within this broad paradigm had its own distinctive air of righteous struggle, it's worth remembering how much of its intellectual roots lie in moments of political defeat. British cultural Marxists like Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson wrote their most influential work in the shadows cast by the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and later by the political disappointments of Wilson's 1960s Labour government. Their successors at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies were intellectual refugees from the early years of Thatcherism. In India, the Subaltern Studies project was born out of the ashes of the early 1970s Naxalite agitations, and the bitter political disillusion of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. In all these cases, the pursuit of politics and political struggle in other places not normally thought of as political – in domesticity, styles of dress, religious and other idioms – was a kind of redemptive act, a gesture of hope in an otherwise bleak political landscape. The price, though, was either indifference, or even hostility, to what people themselves might take to be the political.

19 A good empirical example of this can be found in Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). As well as sabotaging the farm machinery, and swapping counter-hegemonic gossip about their local oppressors, people in Sedaka do quite a bit of politics. Scott is too honest an ethnographer not to record this, but the facts of local politics are left outside his dominant narrative, and dealt with in a voice of mild puzzlement. Why do a minority of

villagers, some rich but mostly poor, align themselves with the opposition PAS when there is no possible material advantage in so doing? In running through the reasons, Scott ends up with the half-hearted categories « moral appeal » and « sheer pride and stubbornness » (1985: 134-5).

20 A more concerted attempt to theorize the issue can be found in the early programmatic statements of the Subaltern collective. Ranajit Guha's « On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India » (Guha, 1982) complains about « the narrow and partial view of politics » in existing historiography, a view in which « the parameters of Indian politics are assumed to be or enunciated as exclusively or primarily those of the institutions introduced by the British for the government of the country and the corresponding sets of laws, policies, attitudes and other elements of the superstructure ». His target here is those historians of the 1960s and early 1970s whose concern with the formal minutiae of factions and alliances among colonial elites parallels the similar work done by political anthropologists at that time. In contrast to this narrow identification of politics with the workings of the colonial state, Guha delineates what he calls the « *autonomous* domain » of « *the politics of the people* » (Guha, 1982: 3-4; original emphasis). And, in a later essay, he talks about the state as « an *absolute externality… structured like a despotism*, with no mediating depths, no space provided for a transaction between the will of the rulers and that of the ruled » (Guha, 1989: 274). In other words, Guha is insisting on a radical break between state and society, with the state only ever imaginable as something emanating from outside the local social order. And, lest we think this only refers to the colonial state, he closes this later essay with an allusion to « the character of the successor regime too as a dominance without hegemony » (Guha, 1989: 307).

21 Here then, we may find, in an unusually clear and theorized form, an explanation for the most obvious lacuna in the literature of resistance: the world of organized politics, with its elections, spectacles, feats of outlandish representation, outbreaks of violence, and endless capacity for moral alarm. All of this is, as it were, outside the frame. In the literature on resistance, the state is never a resource, or a place to seek justice, let alone a zone of hope, however distant or deferred, in the political imaginary. It is, if it appears at all, an « absolute externality », an alien source of coercion, violence or fear; and thus the only theoretically correct response to the state is resistance. I am, of course, extemporizing into territory not covered in Guha's article, but a sense of the state as « absolute externality » is precisely what we find, again and again, in the anthropological literature on resistance.

22 This grouchy excursus into recent history has clarified three issues to do with the political. One is that it is hard to map the political onto the Manichaean struggle between power and resistance. The second is that understanding the political, not surprisingly, requires a parallel understanding of the state. The third, which links the first two, is that, in the space of the political, the state is not necessarily seen as distant and alien, but rather there is always the enticing possibility, however much deferred, of making *the* state « *our* state ». That, of course, is the promise of democracy.

Resources for an anthropology of the political

23 Let me recapitulate the argument so far. The point of this paper is to argue the case for a new approach to the anthropology of the political, an approach that would do better justice to the complexity of the examples I cited in my introduction: two larger than life

political leaders, MGR and Laloo; the emergence of a self-conscious category of « the political » covering specific actors, settings, performances, and collectivities; and an ambivalent attitude, part horror, part fascination, towards this emergent category. In this final section I want to review some of the intellectual resources which may help to illuminate the issue. First, though, I want to return to the early history of the political in Sri Lanka in order to tease out two central issues: the political as productive, and the centrality of the agonistic.

24 Some years ago the political analyst Mick Moore (1985) suggested the most useful periodization for Sri Lankan political history would pivot around 1931 (rather than, say, Independence or any of the subsequent major regime changes), which would have the interesting consequence of making the modern history of Sri Lanka an essentially democratic history[3]. The crucial transition was not the formal transfer of power in 1948, or the shift from a patrician to a populist mode of politics in 1956. 1931 was the year in which universal adult suffrage was introduced, despite the reservations of Sri Lanka's leading nationalist politicians (who thought their people « unready » for political participation). Almost immediately elite politicians started to mobilize voters on « ethnic » lines, such that political relations between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority started to polarize even before the first votes had been cast in the new mass politics (Russell, 1982). Consider the electoral history of my fieldwork area in the 1930s. The first representative was a member of the best-known local elite family, and was elected unopposed in 1931. When he retired on health grounds in 1933, his family threw their weight behind a well-known local Tamil figure, who was narrowly defeated by a Colombo-based candidate. His local backers suffered the further humiliation of having a bag of lentils – the quintessential Tamil food – left on their verandah. And so it went on through the 1930s, as more and more elite families became embroiled in the ever more bitter local political fighting, different factions putting forward their candidates, and different parties aligning on either side (Jiggins, 1979: 96-111). Reading about these events during my field research, I used to wonder how this all must have appeared to those not directly involved. Although, the same elite families had squabbled endlessly and pursued each other through the colonial courts, they were still used to a high degree of everyday deference. The pantomime of abuse and counter-abuse which came with these early elections must have made the deference harder and harder to sustain. By 1981 local supporters of the governing party had satirically named their dogs Banda, an honorific previously reserved for the high aristocratic subcastes which, in this area at least, had aligned themselves with their political opponents.

25 Writing in the late 1980s, this is how I described the contours of political engagement:

> Political alignments... are embedded in the particularities of local disagreement, and these is thus a high degree of contingency in party political affiliation in any particular locality. Politics. like petitions and court cases in the past, has become a medium through which villagers can act out all sorts of ostensibly « non-political » disagreements. All manner of rifts and disputes may become expressed as political differences; class could, in some cases, certainly be a factor, but so too could caste, religious community, family disagreements, minor economic rivalries, and bad blood of all kinds. (Spencer, 1990: 226).

26 What was fundamental to the political, as I explored it, was the fact of agonism, what Carl Schmitt called « the friend-enemy antithesis ». The particular social lineaments of this or that particular manifestation of this were, I felt, of less significance than the fact of agonism itself[4]. Schmitt's anti-liberal apprehension of the political has been recently

taken up by Chantal Mouffe, not least for its acerbic value in confronting the « consensual » banalities of the Blair-Giddens « Third Way ». Mouffe (2000), (in a set of essays which I found thoroughly and engagingly Sri Lankan), rehearses a critique of recent liberal theories of democracy. Deliberative theories of democracy, like those of Rawls and Habermas, seek to ground themselves in the possibility of consensus, however hypothetical or deferred that consensus may be. In contrast, she emphasizes the agonistic core of democracy, the need for adversarial positions, and the ways in which the workings of power *constitute* the very identities around which political competition works.

27 These, I would suggest, are the paradoxes and creative tensions which the villagers were trying to make sense of in their apprehension of the working of local politics. The rich and self-conscious local understanding of « politics » as a temporary collective malaise represents an attempt to bound off, and thus make safe, the disturbing workings of something like Mouffe's « agonistic pluralism ». The recourse to violence, especially in the years of terror in the late 1980s, remind us how difficult this work of bounding really is, (as well as why it such an attractive ideal). The party identities around which village divisions mobilized had no coherent existence outside the domain of representative politics (although they omnivorously subsumed other identities with other histories – caste, religion, ethnicity). The roots of ethnic enmity and the coalescence of « Tamil » and « Sinhala » as opposed solidarities can be plausibly traced to the pattern of electoral politics in the first decade of mass democracy (the 1930s in Sri Lanka). These are not free-standing and self-evident divisions which somehow the political process has failed to « manage »: they are in many ways products of that very process.

28 If politics merely produced antagonisms that would be interesting, but hardly news to anyone who had followed an electoral campaign, anywhere in the world, ever (with the exception of some of the curious staged elections under state socialism). But the carnivalesque space of politics is a space of possibility and license: license to argue, and license to joke, and license to experiment with challenges to the order of things. It is, for this reason, also a space of danger, anxiety, and concern. In the 1930s the village I have described was a place where low caste people could be beaten for walking too close to a high caste person, and where the local landlords cultivated an aura of aristocratic detachment from the sordid lives of their tenants: they were greeted with gestures of worship, and addressed with elaborate honorifics and a language of utmost respect. In the very first elections, the tenants had the undoubted pleasure of watching leading members of those same aristocratic families exchange public insults of the coarsest sort, and enduring the very public humiliation of electoral defeat. This is what Sunil Khilnani is alluding to when he speaks of « the democratic idea » penetrating « the Indian political imagination » and corroding « the authority of the social order and of a paternalist state » (Khilnani, 1997: 16-17), and it is what Lefort means by « the dissolution of the markers of certainty » (Lefort, 1988: 19).

29 There are many other things that happen in the space of the political, including not a little humour, fantasy and entertainment. The sheer symbolic excess of figures like Lalloo and MGR (not to mention his successor Jayalalitha) puts the pretensions of most political « science » to shame, but they also challenge the explanatory power of post-liberal theories of democracy too. More theoretical resources are clearly needed. Hansen (1999) has turned to Zizek's comic take on Lacan in his work on Hindu nationalism, as has Navaro-Yashin (2002) in her recent monograph on Turkey. Minimally, this kind of

analysis introduces a certain dynamism in our attempts to think through the excesses of political representation and political discourse, and the ambivalence with which people view, and engage in, the political. Navaro-Yashin, though, also grounds her analysis firmly in recent writing on the state, especially in thinking through the implications of Taussig's celebrated essay on « state fetishism » (Taussig 1992). Recognition of the magical, or auratic, quality of the state is, of course, nothing new. This, in different ways, is what Hocart (1936) and Kantorowicz (1957) were delineating in their writings on kingship.

30 So, I am suggesting that the emerging anthropology of the political will draw its intellectual sustenance from a number of partially independent intellectual positions. Any analyst wanting to explore this area must work out their own congenial space in a rough triangle, with post-liberal theorists of democracy at one corner, psychoanalytically inclined commentators on ideology, representation and symbol at another, and the rich vein of anthropological work on kingship, state and ritual at the third. (And it would never do to forget the material circumstances of those involved, so some kind of political economy would make the triangle three-dimensional).

31 Finally, what kind of an object is a « democratic modernity »? The invocation of kingship and the attempt to clothe the political figure in the magical dress of kingship suggest one example. The President of Sri Lanka in the early 1980s was a part-time magical realist called J.R. Jayawardene. As part of his own project of political self-making he dabbled frequently in kingly imagery, invoking royal antecedents for his own actions, including a rather ostentatious and frankly hilarious recreation of the royal ceremony of the first sowing, which involved a bathetic tableau of elite politicians dressed as peasants, uneasily wading through the mud of a paddy field (Kemper 1991). Here we have at once an apparent continuity with a premodern past, and in its satirical apprehension by some spectators at least, its « modern » antithesis. Similarly, Ruud's argument for the « Indianization » of democratic political institutions, as they bed into the contours of local argument and local concerns, is at once a powerful argument about continuity across any facile modern/premodern boundary, but again (if we think about the 'corrosive' qualities of the democratic imagination) it carries within it the constant threat of discontinuity. Think of Laloo's air-conditioned chariot, followed by horses, camels and elephants. Here, in the space of ambivalence and excess, of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of continuity, we have a splendid object for future anthropological enquiry.

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NOTES

***.** This paper is based on sections from my (perennially) near-complete book, which has the working title *An Anthorpologist among the Nationalists or Anthropology after the Political Turn.*

1. See K. Chaudhuri (2001).

2. Yadavs were « traditionally » cowherd and farmers.

3. A similar point has been made more recently by David Scott (1999: 158-89), apparently without reference to Moore's earlier argument.

4. « The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations » (Schmitt, 1996 [1932]: 38).

ABSTRACTS

This paper starts from a very specific ethnographic context – the carnivalesque world of electoral politics in rural Sri Lanka in the early 1980s – and moves out to propose a new object for anthropological enquiry in postcolonial South Asia. My earlier work in Sri Lanka had delineated the ways in which a strong local understanding of « politics » (desapalanaya) and the « political » had developed in the years since Independence. The political was the zone of agonism and abuse, engagement and disgust, of performance and rhetoric, an area of life at once fascinating and appalling. Similar readings of « the political » occur in recent ethnographies from other points in the subcontinent, suggesting at least a family resemblance in these geographically disparate cultural responses to the world of mass politics. Drawing on recent developments in radical democratic theory – especially the work of Chantal Mouffe – I shall attempt a more formal account of "the political" as a necessary, but necessarily unpredictable and uncontainable, expression of democratic modernity in South Asia. Ethnographic attention to the idea of the political as a site of unruly cultural production may, I suggest, help the ongoing renewal of the anthropology of politics, and allow ethnographers to escape the arid explanatory grids (formalism, instrumentalism, culturalism) which so limited earlier political anthropology.

Partant d'un contexte ethnographique très spécifique – le monde carnavalesque de la politique électorale au Sri Lanka rural au début des années 1980 – cet article élargit ensuite la portée de sa réflexion pour proposer un nouvel objet d'enquête anthropologique dans l'Asie du sud postcoloniale. Mes travaux antérieurs au Sri Lanka avaient examiné comment s'était développée depuis l'indépendance une conscience locale aiguë de « la politique » (desapalanaya) et du « politique ». Le politique était la zone du conflit et de l'injure, de l'attrait et du dégoût, de la mise en scène et de la rhétorique, un domaine de la vie à la fois fascinant et effarant. On trouve de semblables interprétations du « politique » dans des études ethnologiques récentes portant sur d'autres parties du sous-continent, ce qui suggère l'existence d'un air de famille entre ces réponses culturelles, géographiquement disparates, au monde de la politique de masse.

M'appuyant sur les développements récents d'une théorisation « radicale » de la démocratie – et notamment les travaux de Chantal Mouffe – je tenterai d'avancer une explication plus formelle du « politique » comme expression nécessaire, mais nécessairement imprévisible et non-maîtrisable, de la modernité démocratique en Asie du sud. Porter un regard ethnographique sur l'idée du politique comme un lieu de production culturelle désordonnée pourrait contribuer au renouveau actuel de l'anthropologie du politique, et permettre aux anthropologues d'échapper à des grilles explicatives arides (formalisme, instrumentalisme, culturalisme) qui avaient auparavant constitué les limites de l'anthropologie politique.

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Mots-clés: Asie du Sud, démocratie, modernité, politique, production culturelle, Sri Lanka
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